The Coup Wave: Africa's Democratic Setback

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The Return of the Soldiers: 2020-2024

Between 2020 and 2024, Africa experienced a wave of military coups that represented the most serious setback to African democratic progress in two decades. Mali, Guinea, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Gabon, and Guinea-Bissau all experienced successful or attempted military takeovers. The geographic concentration — primarily in the Sahel and West Africa — and the temporal clustering suggested shared causes that demand serious analysis.

Country & Coup Date	Stated Reason and Context
Mali — Aug 2020 & May 2021	Overthrow of President Keïta amid protests over governance failures, corruption, and worsening security; French military presence increasingly unpopular.
Guinea — Sep 2021	Overthrow of Alpha Condé, who manipulated the constitution for a third term; public anger at corruption despite Guinea's mineral wealth.
Sudan — Oct 2021	Military coup reversing civilian-military power-sharing after the 2019 uprising that overthrew al-Bashir; General Burhan seized full power.
Burkina Faso — Jan & Sep 2022	Overthrow of President Kaboré amid jihadist insurgency displacing millions; public frustration with government failure to protect civilians.
Niger — Jul 2023	Overthrow of President Bazoum — the Sahel's last elected civilian president; ECOWAS threatened military intervention but did not act.
Gabon — Aug 2023	Overthrow of President Ali Bongo, ending 56 years of the Bongo family dynasty; welcomed by many Gabonese despite relative national wealth.

Understanding the Coup Wave: Causes and Lessons

The coup wave cannot be explained by any single cause. But several factors appear consistently across the affected countries: a deepening security crisis driven by jihadist insurgencies that civilian governments failed to contain; governance failure and corruption enriching political elites while citizens remained poor; the failure of Western-supported security strategies including France's Operation Barkhane; and the delegitimisation of civilian democratic governance through constitutional manipulation and abuse of power.

In country after country, the leaders overthrown had presided over systems of corruption that enriched political elites while ordinary citizens remained poor. Guinea's Alpha Condé — who had come to power as a democracy activist — became a president who manipulated the constitution and whose associates enriched themselves from Guinea's mineral revenues while most Guineans lived in poverty. The coup that removed him was welcomed by many Guineans not because they wanted military rule, but because they could no longer tolerate civilian misrule.

The failure of the African Union's stated commitment to democracy — its principle of refusing to recognise unconstitutional changes of government — has been inconsistently applied and ineffectively enforced. The credibility gap between the international community's stated democratic values and its practical support for undemocratic governments has undermined the case that democracy offers a better path. These are lessons African governance must urgently learn.

The Coup Wave: Key Lessons for African Governance
Security and governance are inseparable: governments that cannot protect their populations lose legitimacy.
Constitutional manipulation is fatal: leaders who manipulate term limits destroy the legitimacy of the democratic system they claim to uphold.
Corruption delegitimises democracy: when democratic governance is associated with corruption rather than service delivery, citizens lose faith in it.
External partnerships need accountability: continuing military support for poorly governed states props up failure and breeds anti-Western resentment.

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African regional bodies need enforcement capacity: the AU and ECOWAS have stated principles against unconstitutional change — they need political will to enforce them.
Economic despair fuels instability: the Sahel coup countries are among Africa's poorest — development failure and governance failure are mutually reinforcing.

Key Takeaways

The 2020-2024 coup wave — concentrated in the Sahel and driven by security failure, corruption, and public frustration with civilian misgovernance — is a serious warning, not a random cluster of events. Each coup followed a recognisable pattern of governance failure that made the removal of civilian leadership feel, to many citizens, like the lesser evil. The next lesson turns to the counter-evidence: African democracies that have avoided this pattern.